

Kristen Nielsen Testimony in Support of House Bill 5421

Good afternoon. My name is Kristen Nielsen, and I coach and develop new teachers in the city of Hartford. I entered the field of education through Teach For America, serving two years as a prekindergarten teacher in the District of Columbia while also earning a masters degree in early childhood education. I initially entered Teach For America with the plan to teach for two years and then go to medical school. However, my experiences while teaching fundamentally changed me and I will now commit my life to the field of education, and in particular to closing the achievement gap between our poorest and wealthiest communities.

After finishing my two year commitment with Teach For America I chose to return to my home state of Connecticut because I feel very strongly that our state, more than any other, can be the model of excellence in education for all children, and that I have a personal obligation to the community that provided me with such exceptional educational opportunities as a child. For the past two years I have worked as a teacher coach, a position in which I manage, support, and develop 35 1st and 2nd year teachers each year so that they can achieve significant academic results with their students. My experiences as a coach have taught me the importance not only of skilled teachers, but of excellent administrators. I now know that an effective administrator is an inextricable aspect of student achievement, and that though our state is privileged to have many such people, we need many more. It is my goal to be one of these people. I want to use my skills in managing, coaching, and developing teachers, along with my firsthand knowledge of what excellent teaching for all children looks like, as a school leader. This past fall I began searching for pathways to school leadership offered in Connecticut, with the hope of entering a program this year. Current legislation requires me to teach for a total of 50 months and attend a state approved program for school leadership- all of which are currently run by universities and take several years to complete. Simply put, were I to pursue school leadership in Connecticut, it would take at least 5-6 years for me to complete the necessary requirements for certification, as well as a considerable amount of money for program tuition. This is longer than it takes to become a lawyer, or even to complete medical school, and has deterred me from pursuing school leadership in Connecticut at this time. Many of our neighboring states have opened the door to nontraditional and accelerated pathways to school leadership, such as New Leaders for New Schools and state-run alternative routes to certification. These programs attract highly motivated and successful individuals who bring a breadth of experience in management and education with them. I know because many of these individuals were my peers in Teach For

America and are now leading highly effective schools in the District of Columbia, New Orleans, and New York City. I feel that, without an alternate route to school leadership in Connecticut, we are losing many of our strongest future school administrators to states with these programs in place. Since no such pathway currently exists in Connecticut I am now considering programs in neighboring states that would recognize my leadership, exceptional results as a classroom teacher, and skill as a manager of teachers as attributes that qualify me to be a school administrator.

I am thrilled at the possibility of alternate routes to school leadership in Connecticut, and would surely be one of the first in line to apply for such a program if it exists in the near future. I urge you to consider the impact that this legislation will have in our ability to attract highly successful and motivated individuals like myself to pursue school leadership in Connecticut. This will help us as a state to continue improving our educators, our schools, and ultimately the educational opportunities we provide to our children. Thank you.